

## **The Trouble with Emptiness**

**By Jennifer Manlowe**

"In order to kill the self, we must be ready to endure all the wounds of life, exposing ourselves naked and defenseless to its fangs; we must accept emptiness. Every sin is an attempt to fly from emptiness" --Simone Weil (G&G, xxi).

"For Buddhists, emptiness (or Sunyata) is not a negative idea or a term of despair, rather it is an affirmation of interconnectedness--nothing can exist by itself alone, that is, everything is inextricably interconnected with everything else, we inter-are" --Sr. Chan Khong, (LTL, 249).

In my paper on "the trouble with emptiness," I examine the dynamic of female erasure in the religious traditions of Christian mysticism and Zen Buddhism. Because these two traditions have rich and varied histories of belief, it would be a mistake to think one could compare them as if they were two seamless monoliths. To avoid such homogenizing, I examine the language of emptiness as it is used in the philosophical, autobiographical, and biographical writings of Catholic-mystic, Simone Weil of France and Zen Buddhist, Sr. Chan Kong of Vietnam. I pull quotes from the life stories of these two women of the 20th century to help my reader see what I am seeing, that emptiness rhetoric seems to facilitate not only female erasure but a passive politic that I claim is more about social servitude than social change.

Many feminist scholars of religion historically have read "emptiness" in these traditions as "one and the same"--selflessness--and often believe that this self-negation adds up to "trouble" for women. Others have defended Buddhist emptiness against being misunderstood as nihilistic, quietistic, or self-annihilating and thus claim it is not similar to Christian self-abnegation.

Following are thumbnail biographies of each woman's life and practice of emptiness, moments where she could have been more political--but abstained.

### **Sister Chan Khong**

Sister Chan Khong was born to a well-respected family in a village in Central Vietnam in 1938. As the seventh child in an extended family of 22, she writes, "I often felt lonely and neglected" (LTL, 6). She reflects on how she became an activist by writing, "as long as I can

remember, I struggled against authority. Vietnamese culture was strongly influenced by Confucianism and children are always supposed to obey their elders. But I would often argue with my older sisters saying 'I don't care about your age or authority, I'm right!'" (LTL, 6). To survive in a culture that "rewarded seniority over truth," Chan recalls, "I had to develop a kind of toughness" (LTL, 6). At sixteen, Chan began working in the poorest villages of Saigon, distributing food, helping the sick and tutoring children to improve literacy in Vietnam. As a college student, though, Chan majored in Biology. She also studied Marxism as well as Buddhism and came to the conclusion that her new vision of Buddhism was far more revolutionary. At age 26, she co-founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. The school's mission was to train young people to be socially-engaged, non-violent peace activists. Their training was in rural development, which involved living in peasant villages and addressing the people and their needs on a first-hand, individual basis. Already, at that age, she would identify her work as being inspired by the selfless and fearless female role-model of care known as "Avalokitesvara" from the Lotus Sutra—a figure from the 3rd-century Mahayana school with qualities often compared to the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary.

After giving herself over to this work at the School, Chan remembers asking her teacher if she could be ordained. He rebuffed her, claiming she was too strong-headed and would find herself chafing against the special rules of the Zen monastic order for nuns. Chan remembers defending her own choice and particular calling and, true to her childhood determination to resist authority if she felt it was wrong, she argued with her first Buddhist teacher Thay Thanh Tu by saying, "Even though Catholics are in the minority in our country, they take care of orphans, the elderly, and the poor. The Buddha left his palace to find ways to relieve the suffering of people" (LTL, 17) and even said, "Whoever nurses the sick serves me" (Jones, 71). Why don't Buddhists do anything for the poor and hungry [in Vietnam]?" (LTL, 17). Than Tu answered by saying "Buddhism changes peoples' hearts so they can help each other in the deepest, most effective ways, even without charitable institutions. You need to study the scriptures more and become enlightened, then you will be able to save countless beings" (LTL, 17). Others told Chan that "if she practiced diligently, she could be born as a man in her next life, then in another dozen lives, if she continued to make effort, she could become a Bodhisattva, and a long time later, a Buddha" (LTL, 17). But Chan knew from her direct study

of scriptures and her own experience that anyone could become enlightened and that there was nothing miraculous about it. She wrote, "Their version sounded irrelevant to me and also discriminatory against women. I did not want to become a man, or even a Buddha, I just wanted to help the children whose suffering was so real" (LTL, 17).

In 1966, Chan received the fourteen Buddhist precepts and was given the name "Dieu Khong" (Wonderful Emptiness). Shortly after this, as if fulfilling the magic of her name, Chan was arrested and detained for weeks for carrying the book *Lotus in the Sea of Fire*, written by Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh, who at this point was far more political than she. In prison Chan saw that the prisoners received only old rice and rotten fish. During this time she became more mindful of what and why she ate. She writes, "eating had been something I did only to be of some use to others" (LTL, 76). Her fascination with emptiness far outweighs her real concern for what is going on around her politically. While many of the original group from the school made time to demonstrate, write peace plans, petition international support to end the war, Chan's friend Sr. Nhat Chi Mai immolated herself with fire as a witness to the violence and a plea for its cessation. Chan felt such political divisiveness was for those with overblown egos. She did not involve herself directly in such protests and explains her resistance to such involvement, "I was too absorbed in my work with the peasants and children from the slums, and I did not join the 1966 demonstrations" (LTL, 60).

Over the years Chan would say the best way to deal with conflict was silence. She quotes the Buddha when he said, "During forty-five years of teaching, I did not say a word" (LTL, 89). This silence (or quiet compassion) is to be cultivated through mindfulness-meditation on emptiness. Chan believes care, not a political movement, is all we need as a society in turmoil. She writes, "We don't need rules or government to make us act compassionately," according to Chan, "it's our Buddha nature" (LTL, 166).

This avoidance of direct involvement in anything political is precisely what concerns me about Chan's version of Engaged Buddhism. How is such a meaningful stand toward political change to be taken outside of these private vows to be of service? As Buddhist historian Ken Jones would say, "The dogmatism and vehemence with which some Buddhists denounce all political involvement is the same sad attitude as the dogmatism and vehemence of the politicians which they so rightly denounce" (Jones, 73). The benign politics of peace did have its political consequence in the mid-sixties in Vietnam. As a result of their refusal to take sides,

Chan and Hanh were threatened with death by the new government. They fled to France for their lives and immediately started a Vietnamese community-in-exile dedicated to their peaceful practices of co-existence.

Their work, now called "The Interbeing Order for Peace," continues today in Plum Village in [Loubes-Bernac] the south of France. The basic aim of Buddhism for Sr. Chan, is to provide a compassionate answer of what she believes to be humanity's most urgent question: how do we cope with suffering? Of late, Hanh (now an author of over 75 books on Engaged Buddhism) and Chan, together, have toured several countries to testify to their alternative approach to ending suffering through practicing compassionate, mindfulness-meditation. Frequently, they are invited by well-educated audiences of upwardly-mobile people who feel they need to rely on some deeper inspiration than their traditions-of-origin have been able to provide.

These lectures by Hanh on his current vision for Engaged Buddhism frequently turn into three-hour peacefulness meditations on smiling and "planting seeds of peace and joy" whatever your context. Once in a while Sr. Chan will end such a session by singing a song about smiling.

Like a Cheshire cat, Chan's emptiness invites her to melt into invisibility leaving only a docile smile behind for us to remember her by. My question for Chan and other Engaged Buddhists is this: Is the most urgent concern of a viable liberation movement to cope with suffering or is it to interrupt and end it from its multiple sources? If our ignorance of our interdependence is transformed by correct insight, or awakening to the reality that we are all empty of a separate self, is this sufficient to produce a just world? Such a singular focus seems to be a luxury we can't afford as humans who live on a planet that increasingly crumbles under the weight of waste, greed, and various ethnic and gendered hatreds that lead to violence. What are the concrete practices of this liberation movement? Can we afford such quietistic approaches toward peace as mindfulness meditation and "planting seeds of joy" in our materially-comfortable neighbor as the sole-routes for social transformation? Is loving-kindness meditation and the smiling really enough? Now let's turn to Weil's work to understand how her Catholic-mystical conception of emptiness functions as the best way to address suffering?

## Simone Weil

Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909 to progressive intellectuals. Her older brother, Andre, was to become one of the world's greatest mathematicians of his generation (Springsted, 13). Her father was a physician and his profession put the Weil family in solid upper-middle-class comfort and respectability. Though their family background was Jewish, like so many Jewish families of the era they worked to be as fully assimilated as they could be in French society. Weil herself never felt any allegiance to her Jewish ancestry; in fact, she felt some hostility towards it and is almost always disparaging when discussing Judaism or the Hebrew Scriptures, except the books of Job, Isaiah, and Genesis (Springsted, 13). In 1914, her father was immediately mobilized as a physician into the French army upon the outbreak of World War I and the family followed him almost everywhere. From the age of five, Weil wore her protest of injustice on her sleeve: She refused to eat sugar because the French soldiers fighting the Germans on the Western Front had none. Because of their frequent travel, both of the children were schooled at home and through correspondence in traditional subjects. Simone was no less brilliant than her brother but her intelligence was channeled into a religious imagination.

Despite Weil's middle class background, and religious temperament, during college, she took the role of a revolutionary idealist who championed the working class and the oppressed. Picketing, refusing to eat more than the people on relief, distributing most of her earnings to the poor, and writing for radical journals doubtlessly made her suspect in the eyes of the authorities and led to her being characterized as "the anarchist nun" (Panichas) or "the red virgin" (Springsted). Even Simone DeBevoir, who graduated second in the class to Weil, considered Weil to be an eccentric, bleeding heart. Weil used to hand out socialist flyers and give lectures in the school's square and on one occasion got into an argument with DeBevoir over the source of human suffering. When DeBevoir said, "All suffering is born of meaninglessness," Weil gave her a scornful look and frostily retorted, "You've obviously never known hunger!"--something of which Weil wore as a badge of honor and identification with the suffering masses.

Weil's "badge of honor" had its consequences, however. When it came time to assign her to a teaching position, the authorities deliberately placed her in small provincial towns away from the workers' movements. There she taught Philosophy and Classical Philology and lived as thriftily as possible, donating her salary to her favorite workers' movements. When not in

class, she taught night classes to local workers and associated freely with them often shocking the bourgeois parents of her students whose educational ambitions for their children were clearly more aimed at social advancement than Weil's "Kingdom of truth" (Springsted, 15). Due to her socialist philosophies and teaching methods she was released. It was during this time that Weil had her first of three important experiences relating to her Catholic conversion. The first experience came in 1936. She remembers being shocked at the special place Catholicism had in the rituals of the workers and writes in her spiritual autobiography, "There the conviction was suddenly born in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others."

The second experience of religious transformation comes after Weil's health deteriorates even further. She takes sick leave for a year and continues to think and write about the problems of labor, peace and war. At this time, in 1937, she was in Assisi when she says she felt something "stronger than I" (Panichas, xxxix) and was "compelled for the first time in my life to go down on my knees and pray" (Panichas, 15). And finally, in 1938, after taken another sick leave from teaching due what she describes as a "pain situated at the point of junction between soul and body which goes on even through sleep, never ceasing for a second" (Panichas, xxxix). To soothe this pain, Weil spent ten days at a Benedictine Abbey in France and followed the liturgical services of Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday. She claimed, "Each sound hurt like a blow but, by an extreme effort of concentration, I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the [Gregorian] chanting." (Panichas, 15).

With this physical anguish came an epiphany. Weil had a mystical revelation that would change her forever--during the this time she experienced Christ's soothing presence. After this experience she grows to give great importance to the cultivation of emptiness through affliction and claims this is how "God loves God" in creation. She writes, "God's love can reach us and plant a seed in us if there is a void--an emptiness within us; that is when there is nothing to impede or block God's entrance. Weil comes to see that physical labor can function as a spiritual core that facilitates such necessary emptiness. As a factory worker, because she was constantly fasting, prone to migraine headaches, and clumsy as a rule, she had a hard time keeping up with the piecework at the rate that was expected.

Weil came to realize that labor in horrific conditions was universally humiliating but could have spiritual utility. Like Chan, during her arrest, there seemed to be a strange fascination with the holiness of this affliction. This humiliation went so deep within Weil that she writes of feeling "branded by it like a slave" (Panichas, 14). Despite her caring for others' exploitation, her religious sensibility helped her rationalize and even romanticize their afflictive conditions as vehicles of emptiness. She began to write more and more on "affliction" and it became paramount in her moral philosophy. "Affliction can be good for the victim," Weil claims because, "misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father" (SNL 177). Weil even goes so far as to "envy Christ on the Cross" (SNL, 177).

In 1939, after German troops enter Prague, Weil's pacifism ends and she begins to see the spiritual usefulness of affliction not only through labor but through the soldiers' battle on the frontlines. This discovery of the utility of emptiness birthed her newfound sense of the importance of finding purpose in suffering not getting stuck on asking "why?" Led by her earlier study of Greek stoic philosophers, Weil turns to Epictetus who claims that "we can make use of whatever befalls us" (Allen, 99). In the early years of the Holocaust, Weil seems to grow even more passive in her theology and writes, "The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction. It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute or reduced to slavery, put into concentration camps or prison cells, since there (they) are criminals who perform such actions. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very soul of the innocent and to possess them as sovereign master" (SNL 171-72).

Weil came to find a use that could be made of affliction, self-decreation through consenting to degradation. Weil mystifies social injustice by encouraging questioners to resist asking, "What causes this suffering and how might we end it?" and instead encourages them to search "for the purpose this suffering might serve?" She writes, "If everything added up to harmony in this world, we would never look beyond this world for light" (Allen, 103). At this time, 1941, she moves to a Dominican monastery in Marseilles where she harvests grapes with the farm workers and finally becomes bedridden with pain. There she produces a vast corpus of spiritual and philosophical writings whose Christian emphasis is explicit.

As Weil goes deeper and deeper into her Christian mysticism, she comes to reject the atheistic socialism she knew as a philosopher in the 1930s and, because she is bed-bound, has time to become a leading intellectual writing on social duties of the truly spiritual. A prayer taken from her notebooks foreshadows her final wish: "May God grant me to become nothing. In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me" (G&G, 30).

By 1943 Weil's ascetic stance was even involved in her untimely death. When treated for TB in an English sanatorium, she declined taking any medication and refused to eat, insisting that the food be sent to French war prisoners in Germany. Not surprisingly, the coroner's report of her death indicated suicide (Patsouras, 68).

My sense is that Simone Weil had a long history of valorizing self-deprivation born from being a woman who was encouraged, by the prevailing bourgeois and feminine mandate of the religion she chose--one which defines female genius through service to others. Instead of being victimized by this social mandate, she made it her badge of honor and became an Olympic winning ascetic. Like the modern anorexic, Weil took a value her society fostered in women, selflessness, and made it be her primary mark on the world. It seems to be an element of what made her be taken seriously by the literati of her day: T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus, Sartre, etc. My fear is that too often religious history rewards women who do not threaten the status quo.

### **Analysis**

Each woman's troubling religious discourse of emptiness helps her to remain an empty vessel who is valuable insofar as she is "of use to others." She feeds the hungry, licks the wounds of the poor, frets over the imprisoned and identifies with their outsider plight, and wraps bundles of blankets and care-packages of medicines for impoverished children's chills and ills. She functions primarily as self-sacrificial Band-Aid rather than as an agent of real change and justifies this focus with her religion. She is the quintessential virgin mother of all, that impossible mandate that both traditions of Buddhism and Catholicism uphold in their heroines the selfless Bodhisattva with 10,000 eyes and arms of Mahayana Buddhist tales, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of all, of Roman Catholicism. As a scholar of Comparative Religion, I find this troubling.

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